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Teaching and Learning Center (TLC)

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The Tao of Teaching: Achieving WuWei, or Water Flowing Over Rocks

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Teaching and Learning Center

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Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

UpComing Sessions

Using
Blackboard With
McGraw-Hill
Connect 11/1

Blackboard
Training (various
times and topics)

register at:
<http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/TrainingCalendar/default.asp>

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The Tao of Teaching: Achieving Wu Wei, or Water Flowing Over Rocks

I think I may have referred before to a short online book I wrote over a decade ago, *The Tao of the Mandolin*, which is about playing the mandolin as viewed through the prism of Taoism (or is it about Taoism, as seen through playing the mandolin?) In 1999, I wrote a chapter a week for the mandolin discussion group Comando, and by the end of the year, I had written a book with 52 chapters.

There are already books entitled *The Tao of Teaching*, so I will refrain from writing another—but I do want to write about one aspect of the Tao of teaching. In my mandolin book, I wrote about Bill Monroe's powerful but seemingly effortless playing, calling it "Taoism in action." Here is what I wrote there:

I take that phrase from Benjamin Hoff's introduction to Taoism, called *The Tao of Pooh*, published by Dutton. Much to my surprise, this little book is one of the most helpful and clear

introductions to Taoism that I've found (and quite deep, too). According to Hoff, the Chinese word for this phenomenon I'm describing is "Wu Wei." He translates "Wu Wei" literally as "without doing, causing, or making," and he paraphrases that as "without meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort." It's like water flowing over rocks, he says. I will quote him a little further:

"When we learn to work with our own Inner Nature, and with the natural laws operating around us, we reach the level of Wu Wei. Then we work with the natural order of things and operate on the principle of minimal effort. Since the natural world follows that principle, it does not make mistakes. Mistakes are made—or imagined—by man, the creature with the overloaded Brain who separates himself from the supporting network of natural laws by interfering and trying too hard" (69).

As I wrote there, it takes an incredible amount of

hard work and practice on the mandolin to achieve the flow of Wu Wei—but when a player reaches the level of the master, he or she can just begin to play and let it happen, like water flowing over rocks. The good news is that Wu Wei is not just for masters: masters may be able to achieve Wu Wei almost all the time, but all mandolin players will have that experience every now and then. (I am not a golfer, but I know that one of the pleasures and tortures of the game is that everyone hits the ball perfectly, effortlessly, every now and then.)

And as teachers, even if we are not masters who achieve Wu Wei all the time, we have those moments when we do. The lecture is flawless and seems to flow like water from your brain and mouth. The students are all engaging with the topic. They ask excellent questions, and the class seems too short. The discussion session you lead flows seamlessly

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Continued from page 1

from one topic to the next, with the students as eager as kindergartners, straining forward in their seats and raising their hands. The lab works seamlessly, magically; the student groups do their work and share; the clarinet player or the guitar player or the pianist masters those scales because of your clear demonstration; the art students critique each other's work like the professionals you are grooming them to be.

But how do we achieve Wu Wei more often, or, wonder of wonders, almost all the time? The Tao tells us, paradoxically, not to try. The popular phrase "go with the flow" actually came from Taoism. Although much overused and now clichéd, the idea contains a profound truth. Nature almost always goes with the flow, naturally. Water flows over rocks. Birds slice through the air. Leaves bud and grow and change color and fall. If I let go of my conscious will, getting in touch with my Inner Nature, as well as follow the natural laws, I will achieve Wu Wei.

That does not mean "go with the flow" in the popular sense of just passively doing nothing. As teachers, we must

read and study and plan—but after the reading, after the study, after the planning, comes the time to turn off our overloaded brains and let the teaching flow. "Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream," as a great Taoist master once sang. I subscribe to the Post-It note method of lesson planning. I may have an elaborate plan for a day's class, but I write that plan on a Post-It note. All the parts of the plan that I do not write down are in my head, or written down elsewhere, but I come into class with that lonely Post-It note. And then I let the teaching flow. I try to get my Big Brain out of the way and follow my own inner nature and the natural laws. I do not achieve Wu Wei every day, but I do achieve it more often than not.

Think of your greatest teachers, and I bet they will all have in common their achievement of Wu Wei, of (seemingly) effortless action. The great thing is that they all had different personalities and styles. Each of them was full of knowledge and preparation, then followed their own inner nature, as well as the natural laws of the classroom, and like magic, Wu Wei! It is of

course not magic, but it truly can be achieved.

And a final note: if anyone is interested in *The Tao of the Mandolin*, here is the link:

<http://taomandolin.wordpress.com/>

Attention Blackboard Users!

If you use Blackboard and any McGraw-Hill text (or might in the future), you will want to attend this TLC session, "Using Blackboard with McGraw-Hill Connect," on Thursday, November 1 at 11:00. Andrew Friedman, McGraw-Hill digital consultant, will be on hand to show us how to use this technology in our teaching, which is supposed to strengthen the link between faculty, students, and coursework, helping us achieve more in less time. Register at the TLC website

<http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/TrainingCalendar/default.asp> .

XXITE 2.0 ----- The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with

those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and

technology. You'll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at <http://wuxxite.ning.com/> Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: <http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/>

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Join XXITE 2.0 or
Register for a TLC
Session
At

www.winthrop.edu/tlc

Thought for The Week

"We often feel sad in the presence of music without words; and often more than that in the presence of music without music."
--Mark Twain